

Warmth and Ice

The Washington summit talks did not reveal a great deal new about George Bush, but they did tell us a lot about Mikhail Gorbachev — certainly more than he intended.

The meeting showed us again that President Bush is an intelligent, likable man who handles himself with style but has one important drawback as a player in international affairs. He likes things to be cost-free.

When issues of principle get involved that he thinks may interfere with what he wants, he just dumps them. Like, say, supporting the freedom movement in China or standing up to terrorists.

At the summit talks it was Lithuania. First Mr. Bush told Mr. Gorbachev a trade agreement had to be linked to Lithuanian independence. Then, after listening to Mr. Gorbachev's pleas for support, out came a trade package for the Kremlin without Lithuania.

A familiar argument can be made for that kind of policy. But who wants to say that this country believes the ends justify the means? So the Administration tends to mumble while we cup our ears.

But there was more to the summit conference than Lithuania, or more precisely, no Lithuania. The arms talks left the Soviet Union with superior military strength on the ground. But the country is falling apart so fast that to use it against the West would demand an overwhelming national desire to commit suicide.

The agreements about reducing nuclear weapons are good for the soul and the pocketbook. But they still leave both sides — yes, there are still two sides when it comes to survival in a nuclear age — in terror of the destruction that has prevented great-power war for a half-century.

On Germany, Mr. Gorbachev hinted he would slowly do what the realistic Germans knew he would do one day — accept unified Germany in NATO in exchange for some face-saving language and a hefty German package of economic gifts and investments.

He has no other choice now. The Soviet Union and the West failed to work out a plan about how to deal with a unified Germany before it was suddenly upon them. After all, they only had 40 years or so.

Emotions count more than documents and speeches, as good diplomats know. The American public made the Gorbachev visit emotionally powerful. Wherever he went, Americans held out, so clearly it could almost be touched, their yearning to put fears and enmities behind them, to relax their neck muscles.

It was not what he said. A certain document contains all the hope and

plans for the international common roof he talks about. Remember it, the United Nations Charter? Do we really need to start all over?

No, it was the exhilaration of seeing and hearing a man whom Americans believe is responsible for a new era of hope. They hugged him for that.

But in Washington, in a startling moment of self-revelation, Mr. Gorbachev showed the importance of not tying our destiny to his. He talks democracy, and perhaps even believes in a version of it, but in that moment he showed that he acts and

Gorbachev's flash of self-revelation.

thinks like a dictator.

The Arabs, he told a press conference, had been pressuring him about the immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel. Then came a threat: Unless Israel listens to him and prevents the new arrivals from living in the "occupied territories," he will reconsider allowing them to leave the U.S.S.R.

Since only a handful of Soviet Jews have gone to live in the West Bank, the threat meant Israel had to prevent them from finding apartments in East Jerusalem, part of Israel's capital.

Sitting right there was President Bush. Mr. Gorbachev had promised him Moscow would soon put into law the right of Soviet citizens to leave their country.

The President sat strangely silent, listening to Mr. Gorbachev talk familiar Soviet talk — laws mean what the Communist Party or its boss intend at any given moment. This time Soviet promises about emigration were at stake. The next time, what?

The American public's reaching out to Mr. Gorbachev was a warm moment of history that will remain in the mind. So should the icy moment of self-revelation in Washington.

The truth remains: If we move with heavy foot in support of Mr. Gorbachev, and only Mr. Gorbachev, we can trample the hopes of the Soviet people, who want more freedom — and more food — than he is ready or able to give them.

And we can crush the new Soviet democratic movement, still forming, and its chance to lead the country to freedom — for which so many of its members were once imprisoned, so long and so cruelly. □